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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the major influences of state minimum standards of pupil proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics; state curriculum guides; basic skills testing; and a state-funded compensatory/remedial program on public schools in Louisiana since 1980. The state testing program is described in some detail. Its influence in the home is briefly noted, and its influence in the regular classroom is considered in sections devoted to classroom instruction, student assessment, staff development, and time and resources spent on testing. The influence of the compensatory program on lowest performing students is discussed. Finally, influences on school policy are considered, with sections on promotion/retention and use of test results. (MNS)

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A YEAR OF BASIC SKILLS TESTING AND COMPENSATORY EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA

Paper Presented at the
American Educational Research
Association Conference

April, 1983

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A Year of Basic Skills Testing and Compensatory Education in Louisiana

Louisiana mounted a statewide student improvement effort in 1976, the major components of which are 1) the definition of State minimum standards in language arts (reading, writing) and mathematics for each grade, K through 12, 2) the development and distribution of State Curriculum Guides addressing each of eight subject areas including language arts and mathematics, 3) the implementation of a State Basic Skills Testing Program to measure performance on the minimum standards in the areas of language arts and mathematics among grade 2 through 12 students, and 4) the implementation of a State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Program guaranteeing remediation services to the students judged to be deficient in the minimum standards in language arts and/or mathematics.

This paper examines the major influences these student improvement components have had on Louisiana's public schools since 1980. First, the nature and origin of the State Basic Skills Testing Program are described. Particular attention is given the State Basic Skills Testing Program because it is arguably the driving force of this student improvement effort. As State testing is the focus of this symposium, the remainder of this paper then examines the influences of State testing on 1) the home, 2) the regular classroom, 3) the lowest performing students, and 4) school building- and school system-level policy.

The Bureau of Accountability, Office of Research and Development, Louisiana Department of Education, spearheaded the minimum standards definition completed by 1978, and the basic skills testing efforts now in operation. The Bureau of Evaluation, Office of Research and Development, Louisiana Department of Education, is currently evaluating the State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Program, which is in its first year of operation.

Background

Minimum Standards

In 1976, the Louisiana legislature authorized the formulation of statewide minimum standards of pupil proficiency in basic communication and computational skills (R.S.17:391.1-391.10). In 1977 teams of teachers, principals and supervisors from across the State worked with State Department of Education personnel to define the minimum standards in language arts (reading and writing) and mathematics. After review and revision these language arts and mathematics minimum standards were approved by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

State Testing

State assessment of student performance on the minimum standards was authorized under the same legislation (R.S. 17:391.1-391.10). The Bureau of Accountability, Louisiana Department of Education, mounted the Louisiana State Assessment Program in response to this legislation. Between 1977 and 1980 this program focused on the assessment of performance in the language arts and mathematics areas. State assessment of student performance in the remaining six curricular areas is planned but not actively pursued at this time.

Criterion-referenced tests, based upon skills identified in the minimum competency standards, were piloted and administered to grades 4, 8, and 11 in reading during the fall of 1977-78. During the 1978-79 school year, tests were developed in mathematics, and in 1979-80 they were completed for writing. By testing all public school students at these benchmark grades the Bureau of Accountability intended to measure the performance of Louisiana's public school

systems at developing these minimum competencies in their students, and provide the school systems with individualized feedback about student performance.

In 1981, the State Assessment Program was modified to a grade 3, 7, and 10 spring testing cycle in order to allow teachers to have access to their students' test results at an earlier time. Results were returned to the school systems, intended for teacher use that spring and during the following school year.

In 1979 the State Legislature authorized a new State testing program called the Basic Skills Testing Program (R.S. 17:24.4) to eventually replace the State Assessment Program. Beginning in the 1980-81 school year, the Bureau of Accountability developed and piloted the Grade 2 Basic Skills Test (BST). This test was based on the minimum competency standards in reading, writing, and mathematics. In the spring of the 1981-82 school year this test was administered to every public school second grader in the State (approximately 56,000) with the exception of special education students not addressing the State minimum standards. The State will add a grade level to the Basic Skills Testing Program each year, phasing out the grade 3, 7, and 10 State Assessment Program, until all grade levels 2 through 12 are tested each year in 1992. In March, 1983, all public school second and third graders in the State (approximately 125,000) will be State tested in both language arts and mathematics.

Influence of State Testing in the Home

The Department of Education is informing families about the State's plans for testing their children, and is encouraging families to actively prepare and reinforce these basic skills in their children while they are in the home.

Every year the State Superintendent of Education sends a letter to the home of every student to be tested, informing parents about the testing and the intended purposes of the testing. Each home also receives a Calendar of Skills from the Department that identifies the basic skills that are to be tested, and suggests a skill-building activity for each day of the month, intended to stimulate family involvement in the development of their childrens' basic skills. Over 250,000 Calendars were distributed during 1981 and approximately 500,000 Calendars were distributed in 1982.

After the State testing has taken place, each home receives a report of its child's basic skills performance. This report is delivered by the Department of Education to the regular classroom of each tested student. The teacher then delivers the report to the student's family, usually during a parent conference, so that the test results can be explained and remediation plans developed and reviewed with the family.

Influence of State Testing in the Regular Classroom

The influences of State testing on classroom instruction, student assessment, and staff development in the public schools are presented below. Then some of the costs of State testing are discussed.

Classroom Instruction

In 1979, the Louisiana legislature authorized the development and distribution of Curriculum Guides for all required subjects (R.S.17:24.4). Since 1979, the Bureau of Curriculum, Inservice, and Staff Development has carried out the piloting, field testing, development, and distribution of 26 different Curriculum Guides addressing a wide range of subject areas and grade levels. The English Language Arts K-6 Curriculum Guide and the

Mathematics K-8 Curriculum Guide are of particular interest because they are designed specifically to aid in the instruction of the minimum standards tested by the State. Since 1980, 16,500 English Language Arts K-6 Curriculum Guides and 16,500 Mathematics K-8 Curriculum Guides have been distributed to Louisiana's public school systems on request free of charge. Each Guide contains approximately 600 pages of suggested instructional activities organized by basic skill (minimum standard) and grade level. The Guides in these subjects have received the greatest amount of use because grade 2 and 3 language arts and mathematics will be tested in March, 1983.

Nearly all of the public school systems in the State have keyed their local elementary reading and mathematics curricula to the State minimum standards in order to encourage and assist teachers in addressing the minimum standards in their classrooms. For example, Winn and Beauregard Parishes have developed a Correlation Manual that keys pages in their curricula to each of the grade 2 skills. The East Baton Rouge Public School System has developed its own Criterion Referenced Testing System that is firmly grounded in curricular materials. East Baton Rouge keyed the State minimum standards to its own skills hierarchy (a maximum skills system) as an aid to its teachers.

Student Assessment

In 1981, the Bureau of Accountability, Louisiana Department of Education, prepared and distributed to every second grade teacher in the State a Grade 2 Item Specifications Manual. This was designed to inform teachers of the types of items to expect on the Grade 2 BST and to encourage teachers to construct items of their own for skill assessment and to give their students experience in test taking. A Grade 3 Item Specifications Manual was prepared and distributed by the Department of Education to every grade 3 public school

teacher in the State in 1982 as grade 3 was added to the State Basic Skills Testing in 1983. The Item Specifications Manuals provide item descriptions and examples in layman's terms to simplify the item writing task.

At least two different grade 2 basic skills practice tests have been developed and used widely across the State during the 1982-83 school year: the Cenla Professional Development Center (PDC) Grade 2 Basic Skills Practice Test and the Fifth District PDC Grade 2 Basic Skills Practice Test. These tests were developed in response to a number of requests from teachers for a grade 2 practice test. These practice tests each contain four items per skill on a single page. This allows the teacher to prepare a test of only as many skills as he/she wants to assess at any point. Many school systems, such as the East Baton Rouge Public Schools that have developed or purchased their own criterion referenced testing system in language arts and mathematics have also developed grade 2 practice tests for use by their teachers.

Staff Development

During the 1982-83 school year Louisiana's public school systems have conducted staff development activities for their second grade teachers to help them prepare their students for the State testing. This author estimates that roughly half of the State's public school systems have turned to the State-funded Professional Development Centers (PDCs) and the State's Special Plan Upgrading Reading (SPUR) project for help in this staff development. During the 1981-82 school year the Fifth District PDC, which serves a group of 20 public school systems in the northern part of the State, operated the "Grade 2 Competence in '82" program aimed at preparing teachers and students for the Grade 2 BST. The highlight of this program was a weekend Teachers' Rally attended by more than 450 grade 2 teachers from within the Fifth District Consortium. This program's services have focused on improving the

teachers' ability to deliver basic skills instruction, to develop test taking skills in students, and to prepare and use their own student assessment to aid instruction. A grade 2 and grade 3 program is under way in the Fifth District this school year. The SPUR project has a staff of locally based technical assistants, each of whom has regional responsibility within the State. These staff members have each conducted inservice training, on request, for grade 2 teachers to help them develop language arts basic skills in their students.

Time and Resources Spent with Testing

State basic skills testing consumed the better part of three school days for each second grade student tested. The testing was administered by the second grade classroom teachers during March, 1982. Part of the first day was used for a practice test, part of the second day for the 60 item language arts section, and part of the third day for the 60 item mathematics section of the Grade 2 BST. Additional teacher time was required to conduct make-up testing for second graders absent during the testing sessions. The same amount of time per child will be required for the grade 3 testing.

This State basic skills testing also comes during the time of the school year when many of Louisiana's school systems are conducting their local norm referenced and/or criterion referenced testing. One second grade teacher estimated that all testing consumed approximately one month of the school year. The Director of Evaluation of one of Louisiana's larger school systems rescheduled his school system's criterion referenced summary testing from the spring to the fall so as not to overburden the classroom teacher with testing at a single point during the school year. Thus, the State basic skills testing poses an additional responsibility for the classroom teacher whose schedule often includes local testing as well.

The State testing is coordinated by the Bureau of Accountability within the Office of Research and Develoment with the assistance of a locally assigned test coordinator in each school system. These individuals are carefully prepared by the Department of Education, through a series of training sessions, to handle all the logistics of test distribution, administration, and return, and all testing of special education students as required by State Law (R.S. 17:24.4). These test coordinators then play a key role in the distribution and interpretation of test results in the months following testing. The Bureau of Accountability coordinated Test Utilization Workshops for these test coordinators in April, 1982, to prepare them to be able to distribute and explain the test results that were due to arrive in each school system in early May, 1983. Hence, there has been established in each school system a strong linkage between the Bureau of Accountability and the school systems' central offices regarding State testing.

Influence of State Testing on Lowest Performing Students (Compensatory/Remedial Education)

The Compensatory Remedial Education law (R.S. 17:394-17:400) directed the State to provide remediation during the 1982-83 school year for the second graders who failed to attain at or above a score of 75 percent correct on the language arts and/or mathematics sections of the Grade 2 BST. Some 6,056 second graders (11% of those tested) were identified as eligible for remediation. School systems were provided State funds in the amount of $350 per student per area of eligibility to address these students' deficient basic skills. Local compensatory/remedial programs were operated during the summer, 1982, and during the 1982-83 regular school year. Thirty-three of the 66 public school systems in Louisiana chose to offer a summer school to their eligible students, and 2,263 students (36% of those qualifying)

attended the summer school. All 66 school systems are operating programs during the regular 1982-83 school year providing instructional services to the students who did not attend summer school. Some 14 percent of the students who attended summer school but did not attain mastery of all their deficient skills are also receiving regular year remediation.

The Bureau of Evaluation of the Office of Research and Development conducted a formal evaluation of this State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Summer School Program during the summer of 1982. The Bureau obtained information from three sources to carry out this evaluation. A Student Profile was submitted for each summer school student, a sample of 390 summer school students was tested in the grade 2 basic skills at the close of summer school, and summer school teachers completed a survey of their summer school instructional practices. The major findings from these data sources are outlined below.

- Thirty-three of the State's 66 public school systems offered summer school programs. A total of 2,263 eligible students was served by the State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Summer Program; 1,904 of these students received 70 hours of language arts remediation and 1,170 received 70 hours of mathematics remediation.
- Students included in the testing samples for both language arts and mathematics showed gains in performance at the close of summer school.
- Approximately 59 percent of the students who took the evaluation test in language arts scored at or above 75 percent correct.
- Approximately 85 percent of the students who took the evaluation test in mathematics scored at or above 75 percent correct.
- Among all students instructed in language arts, the teachers judged that 58 percent of these students' language arts deficiencies had been removed.
- Among all students instructed in mathematics, the teachers judged that 74 percent of these students' mathematics deficiencies had been removed.

In summary, Louisiana's State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Program represents a State commitment to the development of minimal language arts and mathematics competencies in every Louisiana public school student and a first step by the State to focus services on those with identified educational needs. The long range impact of the State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Program will ultimately be reflected in the year-to-year basic skills test performances of the students served by the Compensatory/Remedial Program. Compensatory/remedial instruction will again be provided to the lowest performing second and third grade students during the 1983-84 school year, and this remediation will be targeted at deficient skills identified with the spring 1983 State basic skills testing.

Influence of State Testing on School Building- and School System-Level Policy

Promotion/Retention

One major intended effect of State testing is on school systems' promotion/retention practices. In 1979 the State authorized the Department of Education to require each local school system to prepare a pupil progression plan that would ensure mastery of minimum skills before promotion (R.S. 17:24.4). It further stated that though other factors were to be considered, the results of the student's performance on the basic skills test were to be the principal criterion in the promotion decision.

Pupil progression plans were prepared by each of Louisiana's 66 public school systems for the first time in 1980. Each plan contained the locally developed criteria for K-12 grade promotion/retention. Pupil progression plans have been updated each year by Louisiana's public school systems. Starting in 1982, these pupil progression plans call for use of Grade 2 BST results as a major criterion in all grade 2 student promotion/retention decisions.

In October, 1982, the Bureau of Evaluation conducted an evaluation of the effects of Grade 2 BST performance on student placement at the start of the next school year. All of Louisiana's public school systems compiled and forwarded school-level reports about the grade placement of all second graders who had taken the BST in the previous spring. The major findings of this evaluation are listed below.

- The systems reported that a total of 4,935 students had been retained in grade 2 for the 1982-83 school year. This was 8.7 percent of the students who had taken the Basic Skills Test in the preceding spring. This proportion is an increase of 0.4 percent over the 8.3 percent of grade 2 students reported retained in the previous year.

- Of the students retained, 53.7 percent were those eligible for compensatory/remedial services (i.e., had not achieved the minimum standard on the Grade 2 BST). The remaining 46.3 percent of the students retained had achieved the minimum standard on the Grade 2 BST.

- Students who were eligible for the Compensatory/Remedial Program were about as likely to be promoted (43.0%) as retained (43.2%). However, the school systems that had offered a State-funded summer school promoted a higher proportion of their eligible students: 44.7 percent as opposed to the 35.8 percent of eligible students promoted in systems not offering a summer program. No grade placement was reported for 13.8 percent of the eligible students. Most of these were students in ungraded special education classes.

The major conclusions drawn from these figures are that the State's grade 2 basic skills testing has not by itself dramatically changed the pattern of grade 2 student promotion/retention decisions in the State's public school systems. The school systems are considering BST performance as but one piece of information to be weighed when making promotion/retention decisions. The process of developing school system pupil progression plans, which began in 1980, was intended to restrict social promotion by forcing school systems to state publicly and visibly the criteria they use to promote students. The BST has a major role in this, but other local criteria, such as limits to the number of times a student can be retained or local performance standards in addition to BST performance, can mask its effect.

Use of Test Results

Basic skills test results are reported to school systems aggregated at the classroom, building, and system level. The Department of Education has a contract with a data processing company to handle all test scoring, to prepare reports and to distribute them to the school systems. In 1982 all tests were scored, data analyzed, and reports prepared and returned by May 15, less than two months after the testing. Each student and family received a one-page individualized performance report, each teacher received a one-page class summary, each building received a one-page building summary, and each school system received a one-page parish summary. These summaries reported mean performances on each basic skill by the respective group of students. The Bureau of Accountability conducted Test Utilization Workshops for school system test coordinators. The test coordinators were prepared at this workshop to promote use of the test results in their school systems. Teachers were encouraged to examine their classroom summaries, identify areas of their instructional strength and weakness, and adjust their instructional plan in the following year to shore up any weak areas. In a similar vein, building and school system staffs were encouraged to examine the performance of all second graders in the building or school system and take corrective action (curriculum revision, etc.) to strengthen areas of low performance. The State has not formally evaluated teacher, building, or school system use of these basic skill test reports. One of the authors, from experiences while conducting State monitoring of local school systems, can attest that the reports are filed in student cumulative folders and in building and central office files, and are constantly available for use. In the four school systems monitored, one instance of building level use of the reports to examine or adjust curriculum stood out notably. In Orleans Parish, the principal of one

elementary school was so disheartened when she discovered that her school was in the bottom five elementary schools in the parish on Grade 2 BST performance, that she and her staff vowed to change this situation. She and her building staff have undertaken a basic skills improvement effort during the 1982-83 school year. Keys to this effort are a strong family communication component, an emphasis on discipline, and a return to the basics in the elementary grades.

The Bureau of Accountability, Office of Research and Development, is currently designing methods a school staff could use to examine its building and system-level performance (other than comparison of means), intended to shed light on patterns of basic skill performance and basic skill instruction within the building or school system. These methods of data inquiry are being considered for inclusion in a test utilization packet to be sent by the Bureau of Accountability to all school system test coordinators in May, 1983.

Summary

Louisiana's student improvement effort, the key component of which is its State Basic Skills Testing Program, is influencing the homes, classrooms, and school systems of the students tested. Additionally, special help is being given those students who perform most poorly on the State tests.

Each year the Department of Education is informing parents of the testing and encouraging family involvement in the development of their students' basic skills.

Classroom teachers perceive the State testing as a day of reckoning, but one that can be anticipated and prepared for in the months prior to the testing. The Department of Education and the local school systems are

working to provide the resources and opportunities to these teachers to help them with this basic skills preparation, and to help them use the results of the testing to aid their instruction.

The State-Funded Compensatory/Remedial Program is supporting local instruction aimed at each eligible student's basic skills deficiencies identified by the State testing. Evaluation results provide evidence that the students served made progress toward developing minimum skills in language arts and mathematics.